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ABSTRACT

In May 1986, a survey was conducted at Thomas Nelson Community College (TNCC) to gauge student perceptions of instruction, support services, scheduling, registration, advising, and general atmosphere at the college. Questionnaires were administered in class to students in 28 randomly selected courses. Study findings included the following: (1) overall, instruction received the highest ratings of any area studied, with over 90% of the respondents agreeing that the instructors were caring, effective, and knowledgeable, and that their classes were valuable, comprehensive, and interesting; (2) respondents were highly critical of student activities, with about 33% indicating that there were not enough activities and that the programs were not very good; (3) students were generally pleased with the variety of course offerings, and most felt that faculty and counselors were readily available for advising; and (4) students' general impressions of the college were favorable, with 93% indicating they would recommend TNCC to friends and relatives, and 90% saying they had pride in attending TNCC. Study findings pointed to needs for improved communication in several critical areas, more student activities, improved cafeteria service, child care, and more responsive scheduling. Student responses to survey items are included. (EJV)

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TNCC STUDENT OPINION SURVEY

Abstract

In May 1986 the Office of Institutional Research conducted a survey of TNCC students to gauge their perceptions of various aspects of the college. Among the strong points identified by students were the quality of instruction, the value of coursework, the courtesy of staff in various offices, and the Learning Resource Center. Among the problem areas identified were student activities, course scheduling, the cafeteria, and a general lack of communication between students and the college.

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Thomas Nelson Community College

Introduction

The student survey was part of an overall effort to gather perceptions of Thomas Nelson Community College from staff, students and the community. The staff survey and student survey have now been completed. It is hoped that the knowledge gained from these surveys will assist in the total marketing effort of the college.

The survey instrument designed by staff in the Office of Institutional Research was a group of fifty positively-phrased statements covering the following areas: instruction; support services; scheduling, registration, and advising; and general atmosphere and impressions. Students were asked to strongly agree, agree, disagree, or strongly disagree with each of the statements. Space was left for comments on each of the areas. The twenty-eight classes surveyed were chosen at random from the Spring Quarter course offerings. Although no off-campus courses appeared in the sample, this was not seen as a problem since many of the survey statements were geared to on-campus students. Off-campus students will be surveyed separately with a different instrument. With the cooperation of the faculty, members of the OIR staff administered the survey during a regular class meeting.

Results

Table 1 shows the demographical composition of the respondents. The group is representative of the on-campus student body in Spring Quarter.

There were twenty-two statements with which at least 90 percent of the students agreed or strongly agreed. The five most often agreed-with statements were "The library provides a pleasant atmosphere for quiet study", "The library staff are courteous and helpful", "The staff in the business office are courteous, helpful, and efficient", "The campus and classrooms at TNCC are kept neat and clean" and "The classes I take at TNCC will be valuable to me". There were twelve statements that at least 25 percent of the respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed with. The top five were "I am well informed about student activities" (55.7% disagreed), "The cafeteria offers a good selection of reasonably priced food" (50.4%), "I am well informed about the services offered through the Career Resource and Assessment Center" (47.1%), "When classes are cancelled, I am able to schedule alternative classes that meet my needs" (40.0%) and "The Student Government Association effectively represents students" (37.2%). Table 2 details student responses to all the statements.

Instruction

Overall, instruction received the highest ratings of the four general categories on the survey. Over 90 percent of the respondents agreed that the instructors were caring, effective and knowledgeable, and that the classes they took were valuable, comprehensive, and interesting. Over half strongly agreed that the classes they were taking were valuable. Although 46 percent strongly agreed that their instructors were knowledgeable, only 19 percent strongly agreed that their instructors were effective teachers, and only 23 percent strongly agreed that instructors at TNCC really care about students. About one student in seven felt that the education at TNCC was not as good as could be gotten elsewhere.

Support Services

Respondents were highly critical of student activities. About a third felt that there were not enough activities and that the programs were not very good. More than half felt uninformed about activities. Students who had attempted more than 45 hours were more negative. A typical comment from an evening student was "I don't have time for student activities". Many students commented that they resented paying a student activities fee when they couldn't see it being put to any use. About 40 percent did not feel that the SGA was effective.

Most students felt that the counseling center provided helpful, courteous and valuable services. However, 32 percent of the students did not feel that they knew what kinds of services were available. Half of the evening students and 45 percent of the day students did not know what kinds of services were available through the Career Resource and Assessment Center.

An overwhelming majority of the respondents (97%) felt that the library staff was courteous and helpful. Although there were quite a few comments about noise in the library, most students felt it was a good place to study. Almost 14 percent of the evening students and 11 percent of the day students felt the library hours were inadequate; six percent specifically commented that the library should be open on Sundays.

About 90 percent of the students felt that the hours of the business office, admissions and records, financial aid, and bookstore were convenient. They also generally agreed that the staffs in these offices were courteous, helpful and efficient, though there were some complaints about poor or rude service in each of these areas.

Almost 65 percent of the respondents said they would use TNCC-provided child care services if they were available. Even including the large number of "no responses" on this question, which were probably from students without children, 55 percent of the total sample agreed with this statement.

The Gators area and cafeteria were subjects of much criticism. Although 83 percent of the respondents felt that the area was a pleasant place to gather, half felt that the cafeteria food was of poor quality or too expensive or both. There were many comments in particular about high prices. Several students commented that the Gators area is generally filthy.

Scheduling, Registration and Advising

Students were generally pleased with the variety of course offerings, although more (15%) were critical of the variety of college transfer courses than the variety of occupational/technical (4%), freshman (4%), and sophomore (7%) classes. About 90 percent of the total respondents agreed that faculty and counselors were easily available for course advising; evening students, however, were twice as likely to disagree with this. They were also more likely (13.5% vs. 9.0%) to feel that faculty and counselors weren't interested in helping students with course scheduling. One out of five respondents had trouble scheduling needed classes, and 22 percent felt that the registration process worked poorly. There were many comments about registration. Most

of the complaints concerned tuition payment procedures. In particular, most students who commented did not like having to pay tuition so far before the beginning of the quarter. Others felt that the wait to pay at the business office was unreasonably long. Another major problem area was the cancelling of courses. About 54 percent of the respondents had been enrolled in courses that were cancelled. Of this group, only 10.6 percent strongly agreed that they were able to schedule alternative classes that fit their needs, and 40 percent said they were unable to do so. Students with more than forty-five credit hours were more likely to have had courses cancelled than students with less than forty-five credit hours (63.7% vs. 51.8%). They were also more likely to report being unable to schedule other classes that fit their programs (48.6% vs. 28.2%).

General Atmosphere and Impressions

Overall, students' general impressions of the college were favorable; 93 percent of the respondents would recommend TNCC to friends and relatives, and 90 percent said they had pride in attending TNCC. Only 6.1 percent of the respondents strongly agreed that they felt like an important part of TNCC, a lower percentage than on all but three of the fifty statements. More disturbing was that one-third of the respondents did not feel like an important part of TNCC. There were dramatic differences in the way these students viewed the school (Table 3). While they were less positive about every area, student activities and lack of communication seem likely to be the areas that contributed most heavily to the feeling of not being an important part of TNCC. Over half felt that there was not a good variety of extracurricular activities; almost 60 percent felt that student activities programs were of low quality. About 70 percent of these respondents felt uninformed about student activities, 49 percent felt uninformed about services available through the counseling center, and 65 percent felt uninformed about services available through the Career Resources and Assessment Center. The implications of not feeling like an important part of TNCC came through clearly in the survey results: these respondents were fourteen times as likely to say that they would not recommend TNCC to friends and relatives and 25 times as likely to say they were not proud to attend TNCC.

Discussion and Recommendations

The survey results make it clear that most students are satisfied with the quality of the education that they receive at TNCC. Many of them are less satisfied with the quality of the TNCC experience. The areas of communication, student activities, cafeteria service, class scheduling, and child care are worthy of special attention.

Communication

A communication problem seems to exist in several critical areas. As noted previously, many students felt uninformed about services available through the Counseling Center and Career Resource and Assessment Center. Garland (1985) says that, "...increasing vocationalism and concern for personal success... suggests that students [in the 1980's] will be most interested in those activities in which they see direct personal benefit, which might include career planning and placement, extracurricular activities that complement career goals, and the like." Students who feel that such

activities are unavailable or who are uninformed about them could feel that they are being shortchanged.

One thing that would undoubtedly help is a required orientation for all entering students when they enroll. Informal studies done by the counseling center show that General 100 does a good job of informing students about the school and its services. It is interesting to note that 88 percent of the students who strongly agreed that they felt like an important part of TNCC had taken General 100; less than half of the respondents who strongly disagreed with that statement had taken the course. However, General 100 has two inherent drawbacks: it need only be taken to satisfy graduation requirements, and it costs $17. In a random sample of three of the seven General 100 sections offered in Spring 1986, 30 percent of the students were in at least their second year at TNCC and 20 percent were graduating that quarter. Also, the percentage of F and W grades in all General 100 sections offered (33.4) was about twice the rate for all grades given in credit courses during Spring. We cannot afford to allow so many of our students to begin their college careers at TNCC without the information we think it important for them to have.

Student Activities

As stated earlier, the student activities program at TNCC appears to have a lot to do with the feelings of not belonging that many students at TNCC have. One statement that is heard a lot is that you can't get students at a two-year commuter school to participate in activities outside of the classroom. This does not seem to be true at TNCC. The high level of dissatisfaction with the programs seems to indicate that many students are interested. A logical place to start would be to find out what kinds of activities our students would be interested in.

Cafeteria Service

In his book about community colleges, Second Best, Steven Zwerling makes the following point:

> It begins in our own [cafeteria], which is typical of those at two-year colleges throughout the country. At best you don't get ill from the food; at worst you sit at uncleared tables assaulted by noise so loud you have to shout to be heard by your friends sitting across from you...cleanliness, health, conversation, it seems, are not important to our students. But less than a mile from us is Wagner College and its cafeteria...It's not a great school by any measure--except perhaps as judged by its cafeteria. At least to us it's great because of its carpeted floor, comfortable chairs, modern wooden tables, its quiet, and the fact that for $1.25 or so you can eat all the lunch you want: salads, sodas, ice cream, the works. At our place, $1.25 buys you barely a thin hamburger, french fries, and a coke--all on paper dishes with plastic forks...Each cafeteria reveals precisely what its school thinks is appropriate for its students: one institution wants and gets quality service for its students; the other doesn't care.

Replace Wagner College with Christopher Newport College, update the 1976 prices, and it would be difficult to tell that the above passage was not written about TNCC. Over half of the respondents in our survey felt that the cafeteria food is not good or that the prices are too high. This alone renders it unsuitable for the TNCC student body. On the other hand, most respondents felt that the Gators area was a pleasant place to gather. A commitment to turn this into a nice area for students, with improved furnishings, lounge areas, and decent food service would send a strong message to the students that we do care.

Child Care

There appears to be a solid base of students who would use college-provided child care services. One-fourth of the respondents strongly agreed that they would use such services if provided. When this percentage is projected to the entire student body, it translates into over 1000 members of the student body. While this would be a mere convenience to some, for others it might make the difference between attending or not attending TNCC. According to the 1980 U.S. Census, there were 10,854 single parent families with children under 18 in our service area, and more than half of them were below the poverty level. If TNCC could offer free or inexpensive child care on campus, we might be opening a door to the future for many of those parents. If incorporated into our Early Childhood Development Assistant curriculum, it would provide valuable experience for students in that program.

Scheduling

Two major problems perceived by students in this area were the scheduling of classes they needed and the cancellation of classes. A preliminary study by the Office of Institutional Research has discovered several curriculums in which a part-time student who enrolled in Fall 1981 could not possibly have graduated in five years. This appears to be particularly difficult for evening students. If trends of the past several years continue, part-time and evening students will become more and more important. In Fall 1981, part-time students made up 67.6 percent of the student body and evening students made up 34.1 percent. In Fall 1985, those numbers were 76.6 percent and 39.7 percent, respectively. Understanding and catering to the needs of these students is becoming more critical. Evidence from a recent survey of non-returning students indicates that many students stop attending TNCC because the courses they need are rarely offered or because they are cancelled when they are offered. The TNCC Long-Range Plan calls for an analysis of course offerings and scheduling by June 1987. A way of resolving the conflicts between productivity and course availability will have be to found.

Conclusion

TNCC is perceived as a good choice by most of its students. There is a strong foundation of instructional quality. However, this survey has pointed out some problem areas that have most likely contributed to TNCC's declining enrollments. The survey has also identified some areas that we could improve to make attending TNCC more fulfilling for our students.

We are facing more competition for our students now than at any other time in our history. For instance, in 1983, Christopher Newport College had 648 freshman applicants and accepted 89 percent, with 87 percent of those accepted actually enrolling. In 1985, there were 478 freshman applicants (-26.2%). Over 93 percent were accepted, with 77 percent of those accepted actually enrolling. It seems likely that CNC is now forced into a posture of accepting students they would not previously have accepted, students whose "last resort" would probably be TNCC. Our challenge is to make TNCC a "first choice" institution. The services and activities we provide outside of the classroom will in large part determine our success in this effort.

References

Garland, P.H. Serving More Than Students: A Critical Need for College Student Personnel Services. ASHE-ERIC Higher Education Report No. 7. Washington, D.C.: Association for the Study of Higher Education, 1985.

Zwerling, R.S. Second Best: the Crisis of the Community College. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1976.

Table 1

DEMOGRAPHICAL COMPOSITION OF SURVEY RESPONDENTS

	Survey Respondents		Total On-Campus Spring Headcount	
	#	%	#	%
Male	123	43.5	1910	44.5
Female	160	56.5	2384	55.5
Day	147	51.9	2553	59.5
Evening	136	48.1	1741	40.5
Occupational/Technical	162	57.2	2310	53.8
College Transfer	81	28.6	1270	29.6
Unclassified	40	14.1	714	16.6
White	205	72.4	3081	71.8
Black	60	21.2	1053	24.5
Other	18	6.4	160	3.7

Note: There were 308 survey respondents. Twenty-five did not put their social security number on the survey instrument, so no demographical information is available for them. Students were classified as evening students if they completed the survey in an evening class. Because the headcount definition for an evening student is someone who takes only evening classes, some day students have probably been counted as evening students in our survey, which would account for the higher percentage in the sample.

Table 2

STUDENT RESPONSES TO SURVEY

	N	% Strongly Agree	% Agree	% Disagree	% Strongly Disagree
Instruction					
1. Instructors at TNCC really care about students	307	23.1	67.8	7.5	1.6
2. Classes at TNCC are interesting	308	16.2	77.9	5.2	0.6
3. Instructors at TNCC know their subjects	308	46.4	49.4	4.2	0.0
4. Instructors at TNCC are effective teachers	306	19.3	73.2	6.9	0.7
5. Instructors at TNCC maintain high academic standards; students earn their grades	306	37.9	55.2	5.6	1.3
6. The education I am receiving at TNCC is as good as I would receive anywhere else	303	30.7	55.8	10.2	3.3
7. The classes I take at TNCC will be valuable to me	307	52.4	44.3	2.9	0.3
8. The classes offered in my curriculum cover the field well	303	37.3	55.8	5.0	2.0
Support Services					
9. TNCC offers a good variety of extracurricular activities for students	283	7.4	61.5	22.3	8.8
10. Student activities programs are high quality	272	5.9	58.5	29.8	5.9
11. Appropriate student activities are available for all students at TNCC	277	10.1	55.6	26.0	8.3
12. I am well informed about student activities	291	4.1	40.2	41.6	14.1

Table 2 (continued)

	N	% Strongly Agree	% Agree	% Disagree	% Strongly Disagree
13. The Student Government Association effectively represents students	253	4.7	58.1	28.1	9.1
14. The counseling center provides the kinds of services students need	283	25.4	58.0	12.7	3.9
15. The staff and counselors in the counseling center are courteous and helpful	292	36.6	53.8	7.2	2.4
16. I feel well informed about services available through the counseling center	293	18.1	50.2	27.0	4.8
17. The TNCC library has the books and audiovisual resources I need	297	34.0	57.9	5.4	2.7
18. The library's hours of operation are adequate to meet students' needs	298	34.6	52.7	9.4	3.4
19. The library provides a pleasant atmosphere for quiet study	302	44.4	46.7	5.6	3.3
20. The library staff are courteous and helpful	302	48.7	48.7	1.7	1.0
21. The business office, admissions and records, financial aid, and bookstore are open at convenient times for students	306	27.8	62.1	7.8	2.3
22. The staff in the business office are courteous, helpful, and efficient	304	33.9	63.2	3.0	0.0
23. The staff in the admissions and records office are courteous, helpful, and efficient	306	35.3	59.8	4.6	0.3
24. The staff in the bookstore are courteous, helpful, and efficient	304	23.0	66.1	8.6	2.3
25. The staff in the financial aid office are courteous, helpful, and efficient	251	30.7	62.6	6.0	0.8

Table 2 (continued)

	N	% Strongly Agree	% Agree	% Disagree	% Strongly Disagree
26. Security officers (campus police) are courteous and helpful	282	24.5	68.4	4.3	2.8
27. I am well informed about the services offered through the Career Resources and Assessment Center	289	11.1	41.9	38.8	8.3
28. I would use TNCC-provided child care services if they were available	266	24.8	40.2	25.2	9.8
29. The Gators area is a pleasant place for students to gather informally	288	20.8	62.5	12.8	3.8
30. The cafeteria offers a good selection of reasonably priced foods	280	6.4	43.2	28.6	21.8
Scheduling, Registration, and Advising					
31. TNCC offers a good variety of college transfer courses	300	17.7	67.7	11.3	3.3
32. TNCC offers a good variety of occupational/technical courses	298	19.1	76.5	3.7	0.7
33. TNCC has a good variety of freshman level classes	301	20.3	75.4	3.3	1.0
34. TNCC has a good variety of sophomore level classes	286	17.1	75.5	6.3	1.0
35. Faculty members (or counselors) are available for course advising	304	25.7	61.8	10.9	1.6
36. Faculty members and counselors are interested in helping students with course scheduling	303	29.4	57.8	10.9	2.0
37. I am able to take the classes I need	306	24.8	55.9	13.1	6.2

Table 2 (continued)

	N	% Strongly Agree	% Agree	% Disagree	% Strongly Disagree
38. The registration process works well	304	21.7	56.3	16.1	5.9
39. Class schedules are available early enough for me to plan my program	308	30.2	58.4	7.5	3.9
40. When classes are cancelled, I am able to schedule alternative classes that meet my needs	170	10.6	49.4	26.5	13.5
General Atmosphere and Impressions					
41. The diversity of students at TNCC creates a good learning environment	299	20.4	71.2	7.4	1.0
42. I feel like I am an important part of TNCC	293	6.1	60.8	29.4	3.8
43. Most students at TNCC really want to learn	302	22.2	67.6	9.6	0.7
44. The campus and classrooms at TNCC are kept neat and clean	302	35.1	61.9	2.3	0.7
45. Tuition costs at TNCC are reasonable	301	36.5	55.5	5.3	2.7
46. The quarter system at TNCC is better than being on a semester system	295	27.5	35.9	19.3	17.3
47. Laboratory and classroom equipment is modern and well maintained	288	18.1	70.5	8.7	2.8
48. I would recommend TNCC to my friends and relatives	301	34.9	58.1	4.3	2.7
49. TNCC has a good reputation	297	28.3	58.9	8.8	4.0
50. I am proud to say that I attend TNCC	283	31.5	58.7	6.7	3.2

Table 3

SURVEY RESPONSES FOR STUDENTS WHO FEEL LIKE AN IMPORTANT PART OF TNCC AND FOR THOSE WHO DON'T

	Those who feel like an important part of TNCC		Those who don't feel like an important part of TNCC	
	% Agree	% Disagree	% Agree	% Disagree
Instruction				
1. Instructors at TNCC really care about students	96.3	3.7	84.0	16.0
2. Classes at TNCC are interesting	97.9	2.1	88.0	12.0
3. Instructors at TNCC know their subjects	97.3	2.7	95.2	4.8
4. Instructors at TNCC are effective teachers	96.3	3.7	87.8	12.2
5. Instructors at TNCC maintain high academic standards; students earn their grades	95.7	4.3	87.7	12.3
6. The education I am receiving at TNCC is as good as I would receive anywhere else	93.6	6.4	75.3	24.7
7. The classes I take at TNCC will be valuable to me	98.9	1.1	95.1	4.9
8. The classes offered in my curriculum cover the field well	96.8	3.2	89.0	11.0
Support Services				
9. TNCC offers a good variety of extracurricular activities for students	80.0	20.0	46.8	53.2
10. Student activities programs are high quality	77.4	22.6	41.3	58.7
11. Appropriate student activities are available for all students at TNCC	76.2	23.8	46.7	53.3
12. I am well informed about student activities	53.1	46.9	30.9	69.1

Table 3 (continued)

	Those who feel like an important part of TNCC		Those who don't feel like an important part of TNCC	
	% Agree	% Disagree	% Agree	% Disagree
13. The Student Government Association effectively represents students	72.0	28.0	50.7	49.3
14. The counseling center provides the kinds of services students need	88.8	11.2	73.3	26.7
15. The staff and counselors in the counseling center are courteous and helpful	95.0	5.0	76.9	23.1
16. I feel well informed about services available through the counseling center	77.9	22.1	51.2	48.8
17. The TNCC library has the books and audiovisual resources I need	94.5	5.5	91.0	9.0
18. The library's hours of operation are adequate to meet students' needs	89.1	10.9	82.5	17.5
19. The library provides a pleasant atmosphere for quiet study	95.1	4.9	91.3	8.7
20. The library staff are courteous and helpful	99.5	0.5	97.5	2.5
21. The business office, admissions and records, financial aid, and bookstore are open at convenient times for students	91.0	9.0	87.8	12.2
22. The staff in the business office are courteous, helpful, and efficient	98.9	1.1	93.8	6.2
23. The staff in the admissions and records office are courteous, helpful, and efficient	97.9	2.1	89.0	11.0
24. The staff in the bookstore are courteous, helpful, and efficient	92.4	7.6	86.7	13.3
25. The staff in the financial aid office are courteous, helpful, and efficient	95.0	5.0	89.1	10.9

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